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Scholarship, science and pragmatism

Towards a literary heuristics

Tenets of the PhD thesis

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In my thesis I shall try to give a new perspective on epistemology through a tendentious interpretation of two thinkers' lifeworks, which may throw new light on the functioning of scholarship and/or science.

i) The two heroes of this narrative starting from the philosophy of science are Imre Lakatos and Richard Rorty. The *birth and growth of knowledge* on the most general level; that was the problem in common which in my view engaged both of them during all of their life. By constructing this structure I will give new possibilities of interpretation for both authors. The main gesture is in both cases that I suppose a never finished major work. In the case of Rorty I project this from his aborted scientific research program of the 1980s, in the case of Lakatos I shall put it behind the title already declared by him.

ii) Due to the early death of Imre Lakatos we are basically left with fragmental pieces of his texts. Those who took care of his legacy, emphasized primarily the Popperian aspects of his thought, therefore diminishing his individual importance. Only in the last decade the number of other kinds of interpretations increased, which put his work in the context of the Hegelian-Marxian heritage. Following this line of thought, I will suppose a homogenous Lakatos, instead of insisting on a mechanical periodizing of his career. I suggest that he had always the same problem in his mind, although in different variants, from his first doctoral thesis in Debrecen until his ultimate writings which remained unpublished: a universal theory of research in general as a description of rational acquisition of knowledge.

iii) For the interpretation of Richard Rorty I shall draw on the postanalytic/postplatonic, but pre-political philosophical period of his work. I suggest that in the 1980s, from the closing chapters of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* to the opening of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* he was searching for an alternative model for epistemology. Speaking in Lakatosian terms, in the first half of the eighties he tried to build up a new scientific research program putting together the two disciplines turning up at the end of the *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*: the philosophy of science (Kuhn) and literary theory (Gadamer). However, since he did not manage to turn this into a really progressive program, he gradually left it behind to change for issues in social and/or political philosophy. Still, I am interested in the Rorty of the eighties, who worked on philosophy of science (Kuhn) and literary theory with the hope of constructing a useful dialogue between them in order to get beyond traditional epistemology.

iv) According to the therapeutic suggestion of Rorty, we should reshape all our theoretical discourses following the model of literature. In result we shall have a decentralized discourse with all points of views living next to each other. For this we should practice the literary kind of reading texts that is not attributing *epistemological* or *hermeneutical* status to them, just using them according to the specific human needs of a certain moment.

v) If we link the working of sciences to the communities running them, we will see them as language games, whose development can be described as *recontextualizations* to be analyzed with the help of the *methodology of scientific research programs*. However, this methodology should not mean for sure a *Method* valid in all circumstances, only a set of *tricks* proving their usability through their practical effectiveness at a given moment.

vi) Against algorithms Rorty would prefer narratives. He would like to describe scientific progress with Dewey like “somebody’s description of how he or she managed to get from the age of twelve to the age of thirty (that paradigm case of muddling through) than like a series of choices between alternative theories on the basis of observational results.” The spirit muddling through a certain set of problems: this is the very common Hegelian root in Dewey and Lakatos, traceable back to the human concept of *Bildung*. This is one of the reasons why *Proofs and Refutations* can appear in certain interpretations as a *novel of education* [Bildungsroman] of Euler’s thesis.

vii) Under the label of *textualism*, Rorty tries to identify a point of view characterizing quite a lot of contemporary thinkers, namely, that “there is nothing outside the text”, to quote the phrase by Derrida. So textualism should be an idealism without ontological commitment, which is nothing else, than the empire of rational fiction, that is—in the special use of the word here—“literature”.

viii) In the homogeneous universe of texts all quotations and interpretations are “out of the original context”, because the original complexity of the web of meanings can never be reconstructed in a single interpretive action. We can only struggle for totality, but never reach it, since every interpretive sentence opens up ways to new textual worlds. This reading-interpreting-rewriting activity is that which is called by Rorty *recontextualization*.

ix) From the pragmatic view of texts follows, that the difference of meanings is not coded in the texts, but in the traditions of different “professions” (interpretive communities) about reading strategies to be followed. Only in this way the quest for differentiating certain kinds of texts can be rescued on pragmatic bases. (And through this the disciplinary dividing of knowledge, for example contrasting “literature” and “philosophy”.)

x) Under the term *heuristics* we should understand simply a methodology of reaching the experience of discovering. This means that we have the experience of a sudden change at a certain point of our system of thought. There is nothing new about heuristic learning; it was called by many different names from the *inspiration* of the Romantics to the *personal knowledge* of Polányi. We can put next to the scientific heuristics a common one, which is the everyday struggle of human beings for putting the phenomena surrounding us into a comforting, ordered picture.

xi) To give some structure for our knowledge as a homogeneous mass of recontextualizations we can use the recently popular concept of *webs* or *networks*. Antifoundationalism translated to the network theory of knowledge means that there is no initial starting point from which the whole network is visible. This kind of network makes impossible making crucial experiments as well, since if two points of the web collide, we still cannot know which one shall be revised. We have to make an *ad hoc* decision about which will be regarded as “false”, that is to be modified in order to regain coherence.

xii) There are no outside tools for evaluating a web of belief. Sentences about quality are themselves perspectival statements, which can appear only as the broadening of the same web of belief. Therefore we have only two options in evaluating these networks. One is *esthetical*, which is just an educated guess about the practical usefulness of a given pattern made on the basis of our previous experience on patterns. The other is *pragmatical*, when we are trying them out in the real world, that is we let them affect or determine our actions, and then we redirect the successfulness of those actions back to the knowledge network in question. The only way to get out from our networks is leaving the world of texts behind and step out into the world of actions.